
論說

Japanese Disarmament In Vietnam After World War II: Through Records And Archival Documents In Some Vietnamese Archives

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From the early 1945, the correlation between the forces in the World War II dramatically changed, and the destiny of fascism was gradually determined. International conferences between the members of the Allied forces were held to divide influence and establish a new world order. In Indochina, the Japanese army replaced the French forces with an impressive coup in March to take full control of the region. Followed by military attacks, on August 15 1945, on Tokyo radio, the Japanese Emperor declared his unconditional surrender. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, the support for the general uprising led by Viet Minh had been growing very swiftly. Only half a month later, Vietnam became an independent nation, and the Vietnamese became free people. Therefore, the issue arose as to the fate of the Japanese troops in Vietnam after the World War II. Based on the available data, especially from archival records and materials, our study will focus on the issue of disarmament in Vietnam and the attitude of the involved players toward this matter. Additionally, it will help to clarify some more aspects of the Vietnamese history in 1945–1946.

1. Potsdam Conference: Key to the Problem of the Japanese Disarmament in Indochina after the World War II

From July 17 to August 2, 1945, in Potsdam, near Berlin, an important meeting was held between the leaders of the United Kingdom, France, and the United States to solve the postwar German problem.¹⁾ The participants at the conference basically agreed on a number of important issues concerning the future of Germany and peace in Europe. Besides, the Allies also devoted themselves to destroying the Japanese fascism in the Asia-Pacific battlefield. At its first meeting, the Soviet Union announced that it would fulfill its war responsibilities regarding Japan and expeditiously move its troops to the eastern front.²⁾ Among other matters, the discussions at the conference included the task of assigning the surrender of Japan to Indochina because Japan had occupied the area since 1940.

In Japan's expansion strategy, Indochina has been known as a bridge connecting Southern China to Southeast Asian islands. Before the World War II, Indochina was a French colony. However, on March 9 1945, Japan became the only dominant force there after a *coup de force*. In fact, the issue of the disarmament of the Japanese army in Indochina had been of interest to Allied powers before they discussed the political status of the region at Potsdam Conference. Stalin wanted to solve the problem of Indochina on a model of Lebanon while Roosevelt was interested on adopting the model of an international trusteeship.

Meanwhile, Britain defended the view that it was necessary to protect the colonial system of the victorious states. On July 24, 1945, at the Potsdam Conference, Britain, the US, and China agreed on the issue of the Japanese disarmament in Indochina. Accordingly, the battlefield in Indochina was

divided into two sections, and the 16th Parallel was identified as the boundary. In the north, the responsibility to receive the surrender and disarmament of the Japanese army was assigned to Chiang Kai-Shek, the head of China's Nationalist Army, while in the south it was to be handled under the command of the British Army.³⁾ Then, on July 26, Britain, the US, and China jointly signed a declaration on the issue of Japan, requiring it to surrender unconditionally, and applying some other political principles to postwar Japan.⁴⁾ In the beginning, the declaration was not recognized by the Japanese government, and claimed to fight against it to the end.

At the Potsdam Conference, the Allies' stand on the Japanese disarmament in Indochina ended the process of negotiating and considering the interests of the parties concerned and became important grounds for the division of the regional influence in this area. However, France's De Gaulle was very shocked by the outcomes of this conference. Therefore, on the one hand, he dispatched the first army of the French Expeditionary Force to Indochina. On the other hand, he quickly met the US representatives and Chiang Kai-Shek to seek their support for France's return to Indochina. De Gaule succeeded in convincing both governments to adopt a neutral stance on the region, and thus, with the backing of Britain, France strongly believed that it would soon be back in Indochina.

However, during that time in Vietnam, taking advantage of the surrender of Japan, under the leadership of the Viet Minh front, the Vietnamese people organized a general uprising across the country, seized powers from the Japanese, and formed a provisional government to prepare for the arrival of the Allied troops in the course of the disarmament of the Japanese army. This event changed the course of the Japanese military disarmament in Vietnam and forced those who threatened the independence and freedom of the Vietnamese

people to panic and recalculate their plot.

2. The Disarmament of the Japanese Troops in Vietnam (1945–1946)

According to the statistics of Japan and the US, in October 1945, there were about 97,000 Japanese soldiers and civilians across Indochina. Of them, more than 80,000 were soldiers, of whom over 60% were mercenaries. The statistics also show that in the 16th Parallel North, there were about 48,000 Japanese soldiers and 2,000 Japanese civilians who were stationed or living in the region.⁵⁾ As early as August 18, 1945, just three days after the Japanese Emperor announced the country's surrender, the Japanese army in Indochina was ordered to stop fighting and stay in camps. During the August Revolution of 1945, in Hanoi, there were about 10,000 Japanese soldiers and their henchmen. Meanwhile, the self-defense force was only about 700 troops. However, with different methods, the Viet Minh met important representatives of the armed forces in Hanoi and persuaded them not to intervene in the internal affairs of the Vietnamese. In Hue, there were more than 5,000 Japanese troops with the intention of granting autonomy to the Bao Dai government on August 23, 1945.

However, this force was soon isolated, and the people's government was rapidly established there. In Saigon, after knowing that the Japanese Emperor had declared his surrender, on August 15, 1945, the Standing Committee of the Pioneer Party convened a conference and proposed the neutralization of the Japanese army awaiting disarmament. The party also wished to get weapons and ammunition from the Japanese army at any price. It is because of this insight that the uprising in Saigon took place quickly and caused less bloodshed. Meanwhile, the Communist Party took advantage of the resources to prepare for a longer resistance. In other localities, the revolutionary forces

also took conciliatory approaches and persuasion to avoid the conflict with the Japanese troops stationed in those areas. In addition to important headquarters that were still controlled by the Japanese, such as Indochina Bank and the Governor General Office, the Japanese armed forces in Vietnam thoroughly implemented the surrender order of the Emperor and remained neutral to the great August Revolution of the Vietnamese people.

Therefore, before the Allied forces entered Vietnam to carry out the disarmament of the Japanese army and establish a government to establish a postwar order, the situation in Vietnam was rather peaceful. The Japanese troops in Vietnam had taken the Emperor's declaration of surrender seriously and dropped the weapons. In Vietnam, a government of the Vietnamese was established to take over the maintenance of the security of this area. As such, when both Chiang Kai-Shek and the British troops landed in Vietnam, they could only undertake a very light duty of disarmament and repatriation of the Japanese.

2.1. The process of the Japanese disarmament of the British Army in the 16th Parallel South

Britain had many colonies in Asia; therefore, regarding the future of the region after the World War II, Britain wished to maintain the pre-war status quo. Hence, right before the Potsdam Conference, Britain backed the French view of its returning to Indochina. The more favorable condition for Britain was the assignment of the task to disarm the Japanese army in Indochina from the 16th Parallel South. Exactly a month later, on August 24, 1945, Britain signed a treaty with France recognizing the French rule in Indochina. Previously, De Gaulle had received the US support for France's return to Indochina. Moreover, during the declaration of the surrender of Japan to Allies in Tokyo Bay on

September 2, 1945, US General Douglas Mac Arthur advised French General Leclerc to quickly reinforce the army to the Indochina battlefield.

Upon arriving in Saigon, instead of expeditiously carrying out the disarmament of the Japanese army, followed the spirit of the Potsdam Declaration. Major General Douglas D. Gracey, the commander-in-chief of the British Army in South Vietnam, paid much attention to assist France in restoring French forces and positions in Indochina. On September 14, 1945, the first units of the 80th Infantry Brigade were deployed in the suburb of Saigon, Tan Son Nhat airport and other important locations around the South Vietnamese Army base. British officers and soldiers and French troops suppressed the Vietnamese people's struggle for independence by organizing attacks and arresting, imprisoning, and killing hundreds of innocent people. Meanwhile, the British asked the revolutionary armed forces to give up arms and banned indigenous people from carrying weapons. This caused great indignation toward the armed forces causing indigenous peoples resorting to non-cooperative measures against the Allies throughout the South. However, on radio, the French High Commissioner in Indochina, D'Argenlieu, vigorously declared that Viet Minh was willing to negotiate with the French and that the French would return to Indochina.⁶⁾

On the morning of September 23, 1945, armed by the British, a troop of 300 French soldiers attacked many locations managed by Viet Minh in Saigon. The rapid spread of the violence was the starting point of the struggle between South Vietnam and the British-French alliance supported by the Japanese. In early October, British troops in Southeast Asia continued to reinforce the South Vietnamese battlefield with sophisticated units upgrading the British troops in Saigon to 22,000. As a result, the British-French alliance, with the support of the Japanese forces, quickly launched campaigns to sweep Viet Minh's armed forces from cities to the outskirts.

On November 30, 1945, British military representatives in the 16th Parallel South received the surrender of the Japanese armed forces. In early 1946, after helping the French to regain control, the British troops, in turn, withdrew from Vietnam. The British Army commander in charge of disarming the Japanese forces in Saigon ended the operation. In late February 1946, all the Japanese troops from concentration camps in Phnom Penh and Thu Duc concentrated in St. Joseph's camp. The remaining British troops were also ordered to finish the task and withdraw from Saigon.

On March 15, 1946, Admiral Mountbatten officially handed over Indochina to Admiral D'Agenlieu, the French High Commissioner in Indochina. By early February 1946, 109 Japanese soldiers were killed, 132 were injured, and 72 people went missing in the conflicts. During the withdrawal from Phan Rang to Da Lat, 33 Japanese soldiers were killed. The number of the combat troops that were opposed to fighting Britain and France reached 478. The number of the Japanese troops demobilized in the South, including those in Thailand and Myanmar, was about 70,000.⁷⁾ Most of them returned to Japan. Some Japanese officers, such as General Ikawa, Nakahara Mitsunobu (Minh Ngoc), and Kishiro Iwai (Nguyen Van Sau), who did not accept the bitter truth of Imperial Army's defeat and were actively encouraged by the Viet Minh, left the Japanese army, fought in the Viet Minh front, and turned into "New Vietnamese."⁸⁾ They not only became important trainers in the training of the Viet Minh officers and soldiers but also provided the Vietnamese army with significant arms for the early days of the arduous resistance war.

2.2. The process of the Japanese disarmament of Chiang Kai-Shek in the 16th Parallel North

Although the disarmament of the Japanese Army in the 16th Parallel North

was not as fierce as in the South, it was equally tense. From the moment of capturing the spirit of the Potsdam Conference on Indochina, France eagerly sought to re-establish its influence on the region. De Gaulle immediately appointed General Lelerc to be the general of the French Corps in the Far East and Admiral D'Argenlieu as the French High Commissioner in Indochina. They planned to use military forces to re-capture Indochina. In mid-August 1945, Sainteny, the chief of the French M5 intelligence service in Kunming, represented the French government in Tonkin, in Hanoi. Although he tried to find a way to gain influence over the parties, it seems that Sainteny became disconnected due to the vibrant atmosphere of the August revolutionary movement of Vietnam.

On August 24, 1945, Chiang Kai-Shek announced that he had no ambition for acquiring any piece of land in Vietnam. Then, the Chongqing government announced its 14-point policy by which Chiang was committed to play a neutral role in the French-Vietnamese context. However, Chiang's perspective on Viet Nam before and during the disarmament of the Japanese troops was not consistent. On August 27, 1945, Chiang's troops, under the command of General Lu Han, crossed the Sino-Vietnam border to Tonkin and arrived in Hanoi on September 9. As soon as he arrived in Hanoi, the military representative declared that the disarmament of the Japanese would take place between one and three months. On the one hand, the government of Chongqing supported the independence of the Vietnamese people.⁹⁾ But on the other hand, it backed up the activities of disturbance, which caused social disorder, by reactionary forces in Vietnam in a bid to overthrow the newly established government.

On September 28, 1945, in Hanoi, the ceremony to receive the surrender of Japan was held solemnly without the presence of France. Later, Japanese

officers were disarmed and concentrated in the camps near Da Nang and Hai Phong. By March 1946, about 30,000 Japanese troops in Northern Vietnam were disarmed and returned to their country, while the remaining 3,000 troops continued to work in the railway work of General Lu Han. On October 20, 1945, 15 divisions of Chiang Kai-Shek replaced the Japanese throughout Vietnam from the 16th North. On behalf of the Allies, Chiang Kai-Shek required the Viet Minh to meet the needs of necessity. The presence of Chiang troops was also demanded in factories and agencies to supervise the work of Viet Minh's representatives.

The political swings in the Civil War in China embarrassed Chiang's troops in Viet Nam. In early December 1945, Chiang Kai-Shek announced his withdrawal from Tonkin, which accelerated the French political movement in Tonkin. In that spirit, on March 28, 1946, the Chinese-French treaty was signed. Moreover, Chiang's army handed over the task of disarming the Japanese troops to France and officially withdrew from Vietnam. In turn, France had to yield some of its benefits it enjoyed in the Chinese land. In both North and South Viet Nam, France won a certain position but what made it worried was the rapid growth of the Ho Chi Minh-led government and the Viet Minh front.

2.3. The attitudes of the Ho Chi Minh government toward the Japanese disarmament after the World War II

Following the Allies' entry in Vietnam to disarm the Japanese army after its unconditional surrender, the Viet Minh front quickly led the Vietnamese insurgents to seize power and build a democratic government in order to actively welcome the Allies. In the process of general uprising, the Viet Minh front, in various localities, also applied flexible measures to avoid clashes with the Japanese and at the same time take advantage of their active role in the

struggle of the Vietnamese people.

In his declaration of independence, President Ho Chi Minh asserted the right to freedom and independence of Vietnam, while rejecting the French colonialists' wish to resume their rule. However, in the face of many predicaments, Ho Chi Minh and his comrades had to choose the right tactics to navigate the revolutionary course of Vietnam. Right from the August Revolution in 1945 to March 6, 1946, the Ho Chi Minh government implemented the policy of *détente* with Chiang in order to expel France. Sensing the motives of Chiang's troops in Vietnam to dismiss the Communists and bring Ho Chi Minh's provisional government down, the government on the one hand took advantage of the people's spirit to demonstrate its power and prestige. On the other hand, Ho Chi Minh was also very clever and flexible in dealing with Chiang's troops to minimize the potential conflicts. To achieve this goal, the provisional government made many concessions to Chiang, such as the acceptance of a deflated currency or the supply of food to Chiang's forces stationed in Vietnam on duty. As a result of these efforts, the government had more time to consolidate the new regime in preparation for a longer and arduous resistance.

After the signing of the Sino-French Agreement on February 28, 1946, the Ho Chi Minh government re-adjusted its strategy regarding *détente* with France to expel Chiang. Shortly thereafter, President Ho Chi Minh and Sainteny, who represented the French government in Indochina, signed a *modus vivendi* which gave permission to 15,000 French troops to remove Chiang's troops from Northern Vietnam while France regarded Vietnam as a free country within the French Union. At a certain level, it was obviously a huge setback for the Ho Chi Minh government in dealing with France, but diplomatically, this was the first success of the revolutionary government in its search to obtain the legal

recognition of the international community.

Although on behalf of entering the North to assure security and together with Chiang to disarm the Japanese army but with higher ambitions, the French colonialists constantly provoked in many parts of Vietnam. By the end of 1946, when the continuation of concessions seriously undermined the interests of Vietnamese people, on the night of December 19, 1946, President Ho Chi Minh issued a call for nationwide resistance against the French that would end nine years later.

Conclusion

Contrary to our initial thoughts about the resources available for this study, not all the archival documents currently stored at the archives in Vietnam contain direct statistics on the situation of the Japanese disarmament in Vietnam after the World War II. This is so mainly because the disarmament issue was not an official task of the Ho Chi Minh government and the people of Vietnam. However, these statistics could be available in the archives in France, England, and Taiwan. The archives in this context available in Vietnam focus on the following two main issues:

1. The resources reveal that the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam took steps to take advantage of the disarmament of the Japanese military weapons after the World War II to protect the nascent government, build the new regime, and develop its international prestige. This issue reflects in the minutes of the meetings of the Government Council of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from 1945 to 1946, which are currently kept at the National Archives Center No. III. According to these minutes, the issues related to dealing with Britain, France, and Japan in the disarmament task was a very

frequent issue which was hotly debated in different sessions of the government. Moreover, the policy and assessment of the situation of the Communist Party of Vietnam (self-disbanded in November 1945) in 1945–1946 can be found at the Archives Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam (published as the Complete Collection of *Party Documents*, vol. 7).

2. The reports, statistics, and records related to the remaining Japanese people in North Vietnam after the World War II, the party organs, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam are also worth analyzing. These documents are scattered in the archives of both the Communist Party of Vietnam and the archives of the state. These sources can be utilized for future research on this matter.

Another valuable and accessible resource is the newspapers that were published in Vietnam in 1945–1946. This is a valuable source for exploring different aspects of life, the attitude of the Vietnamese people in 1945–1946, and the problems of the Japanese disarmament. The resources include the newspapers such as *Sự thật* (Truth), *Cứu quốc* (National salvation), *Quốc hội* (National assembly), and *Nam Kỳ* (Cochinchina).

The memoirs of historians or witnesses who were directly involved and influential in Vietnam at that time are also valuable sources. The memoirs of General Vo Nguyen Giap and *Ho Chi Minh's Complete Works* are also sources for the research on this issue. Besides, the studies of diplomats and other researchers, such as Luu Van Loi and Nguyen Phuong Nam, can be consulted as valuable resources for the study.

Notes

- 1) Nguyen Huy Quy (2005). *Chiến tranh thế giới thứ hai (The World War II)*. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, p. 166.
- 2) Luu Van Loi (2005). “Hội nghị Potsdam chiến tranh thế giới thứ 2 kết thúc

- (Potsdam Conference ends the World War II)". *Journal of Military History*, vol. 165, pp. 39–43.
- 3) Luu Van Loi (2005). *op.cit.*, pp. 42–43.
 - 4) Nguyen Huy Quy (2005). *op.cit.*, pp. 175–176.
 - 5) Cited accordingly to Christopher E. Goscha (2002). “Quân Nhật Bản theo Việt Minh trong những năm đầu kháng chiến (Japanese troops supported the Viet Minh in the early years of resistant)”. *Past and Present Journal*, vol. 128, p. 7. See more: Nguyen Phuong Nam (2016). *Về các tổng tư lệnh, tư lệnh chiến trường Nhật- Pháp trong cuộc chiến tranh xâm lược Việt Nam (About the commanders of the Japanese – French battlefield in the Vietnam war)*. Hanoi : National Political Publishing House, p. 28.
 - 6) Trung tâm Lưu trữ Quốc gia III. Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng. *Biên bản họp Hội đồng Chính phủ ngày 21 tháng 9 năm 1945*. Hồ sơ số 49, tờ 4. (National Archives Center No III. Prime Minister Fond. *Protocol of the cabinet, 21 September 1945*, dossier 49, sheet 4).
 - 7) Nguyen Phuong Nam (2016). *Về các tổng tư lệnh, tư lệnh chiến trường Nhật- Pháp trong cuộc chiến tranh xâm lược Việt Nam (About the commanders of the Japanese–French battlefield in the Vietnam war)*. *op.cit.*, p. 69.
 - 8) Tran Thai Binh (2005). “Những quân nhân của quân đội Nhật Bản trở thành chiến sĩ Việt Minh trong cách mạng Tháng Tám (Japanese soldiers to become the Viet Minh’s soldiers in the August Revolution)”. *Journal of Military History*, vol. 165, pp. 35–36; People’s Army Newspaper (2005). *Những người Việt Nam mới (The new Vietnamese)*. Hanoi : People’s Army Publishing House, pp. 36–39.
 - 9) Trung tâm Lưu trữ Quốc gia III. Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng. *Biên bản họp Hội đồng Chính phủ ngày 21 tháng 9 năm 1945*. Hồ sơ số 49, tờ 1. (National

Archives Center No III. Prime Minister Fond. *Protocol of the cabinet, 21 September 1945*, dossier 49, sheet 1).

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3. Christopher E. Goscha (2002). “Quân Nhật bản theo Việt Minh trong những năm đầu kháng chiến”. *Tạp chí Xưa và Nay*, số 128, tr. 7.
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